

Reading Agnon's *In the Prime of Her Life* in Light of Freud's *Dora*

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IN MODERN HEBREW FICTION, Agnon's influential novella *In the Prime of Her Life* establishes a plot pattern that has been so prevalent among Hebrew novels that it can be regarded as a distinctive national paradigm. This paradigm links two dysfunctional generations through the figure of a shared lover, who is carried over from one generation to the next as a troublesome inheritance. I believe that this structure has been particularly attractive to Hebrew writers during an extended period of national formation because it lends itself to the portrayal of a history-in-the-making, where a family's physical and ideological continuity are always at stake.¹

If *In the Prime of Her Life* indeed crowns the literary history of this recurrent plot pattern in Hebrew fiction, it is essential to investigate how and why Agnon came to develop it in the first place. What were his sources? How did he alter them to project a family microcosm onto the historiosophic preoccupations that characterize his work and that of subsequent Hebrew writers indebted to him? A reading of Agnon's novella in light of Freud's *Dora* allows us to address these questions, deepening our understanding of a paradigm that has been remarkably prevalent in Hebrew literature.

In his psychocultural analysis of Zeruya Shalev's *Love Life*, Yigal Schwartz notes that this Israeli bestseller belongs to a category of narratives that mythologize the Western woman by intermingling two common plots: the predicament of a young woman who seeks a father substitute with that story of a young woman who tries to reenact and repair her parents' love affairs.² Among this category of narratives Schwartz in-

1. For an extensive discussion of this structure in Hebrew literature, see Yael Halevi-Wise, "The Double Love Triangle Paradigm in Hebrew Fiction," forthcoming in *Prooftexts* 26 (2006): 309–43.

2. Yigal Schwartz, "The Frigid Option: A Psychocultural Study of the Novel *Love Life* by Zeruya Shalev," in *History and Literature: New Readings of Jewish Texts*

cludes fairytales such as *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty*, novels by Israeli women such as Leah Goldberg, Ruth Almog, and Amalia Kahana-Carmon, Agnon's novella *In the Prime of Her Life*, and Freud's case study of the patient he calls "Dora."

While these examples are undoubtedly linked by cultural patterns that derive from myth and determine the image of the Western woman, their similarities also result from a genealogy of literary influence. Leading Israeli authors such as A. B. Yehoshua and Amos Oz have openly acknowledged, for instance, that *In the Prime of Her Life* exerts a very strong impact upon their work.³ They draw "threads of gold" from this master text, using them to weave their own stories.⁴ Did Agnon in turn draw threads from Freud's *Dora* to weave his story? Or are similarities on almost all levels of Agnon and Freud's texts merely coincidental?

There is no hard and fast evidence that Agnon ever read Freud's account of Dora's case. In the course of his constant self-mythologizing he denied reading Freud altogether, but in his Nobel Prize address he admitted that as a young man he had devoured every German publication that came his way, and we know that during his 1912–24 sojourn in Germany, Agnon belonged to intellectual circles where Freudian ideas were widely discussed.⁵ "Dora's Case" was first published in 1905 in a professional

in *Honor of Arnold J. Band*, ed. W. Cutter and D. C. Jacobson (Providence, R.I., 2002), 479–80.

3. A. B. Yehoshua and Amos Oz have published extensive critical analyses of this mastertext: A. B. Yehoshua, "A Father and a Daughter in an Unconscious Relationship: *In the Prime of Her Life* by S. Y. Agnon," *The Terrible Power of a Minor Guilt: Literary Essays*, trans. O. Cummings (Syracuse, N.Y., 2000), 108–29; Amos Oz, "Who Has Come? On the Beginning of *In the Prime of Her Life* by S. Y. Agnon," *The Story Begins: Essays on Literature*, trans. M. Bar-Tura (New York, 1999), 17–27. Many further acknowledgments of *In the Prime of Her Life*'s influence on Israeli authors appear in studies of individual texts indebted to this novella. See, for instance, Yael S. Feldman's afterword to Ruth Almog's *All This Exaggerated Bliss* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 2003), 461; Leah Baratz's analysis of Zruya Shalev's *Love Life* in *A Celebration of Disintegration* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv, 2002), 157; and Sharon Green on Agnon's *A Simple Story*, which is itself a "sequel" to *In the Prime of Her Life* (in Green, *Not a Simple Story: Love and Politics in a Modern Hebrew Novel* [Lanham, Md., 2001]; 122–23 and 134, nn. 29–30). See also Nitza Ben Dov, *Ve-bi tehilatekha: Studies in the Works of S. Y. Agnon, A. B. Yehoshua and Amos Oz* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv, 2006).

4. Yehoshua, "A Father and a Daughter," 108.

5. For an account of Agnon's intellectual circles and reading habits during his sojourn in Germany, see Dan Laor, "Agnon in Germany 1912–1924," *AJS Review* 18.1 (1993): 75–93, and Arnold Band, "Agnon Encounters Freud," in his *Studies in Modern Jewish Literature* (Philadelphia, 2003), 241–50. A comprehensive survey of psychoanalytic approaches to Agnon's work is given by Shmuel Werses, *S. Y.*

journal, but after three reprints in Freud's *Sammlung kleiner Schriften*, it was readily available by 1923, when Agnon composed *In the Prime of Her Life* shortly before leaving Germany.

Beyond the likelihood of direct influence, the extensive similarities between *In the Prime of Her Life* and *Dora* warrant a careful comparison that in itself deepens our appreciation of Agnon's enigmatic tale as its status in contemporary Hebrew fiction and criticism continues to rise. Such a comparison will help to answer the question of how and why Agnon developed the particular intergenerational plot structure that characterizes *In the Prime of Her Life*, which then replicated itself across Israeli literature.

To be sure, many of the similarities between Freud's and Agnon's texts can be ascribed to Freud's novelistic maneuvers, in the sense that Steven Marcus exposed them in "Freud and Dora: Story, History, Case History."⁶ Or one could argue that Freud and Agnon drew from universal psychocultural patterns like those that René Girard and Marthe Robert identify across Western literature written before and after Freud.⁷ We can also claim that both authors share common Jewish sources in the Bible and midrash, as Yerushalmi and others have been uncovering in Freud's background.⁸

Yet even the biblical Jacob cycle, an evident source for Agnon's story as we will see, presents fewer similarities to *In the Prime of Her Life*'s voice, point of view, and structure than the historicized probing of intergenerational tension that marks both Freud's *Dora* and Agnon's novella. When considering modern antecedents for Agnon's novella, it is therefore instructive to compare his post-1920s intergenerational love plots with unquestionable pre-Freudian appearances of a similar structure in Agnon's

Agnon Literally: Studies in His Writings (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 2000), 348–50 and 364–65.

6. Steven Marcus, "Freud and Dora: Story, History, Case History," in *In Dora's Case: Freud Hysteria—Feminism*, ed. C. Bernheimer and C. Kahane (New York, 1985), 56–91.

7. René Girard's *Mensonge romantique et vérité Romanesque* (Paris, 1961) and Marthe Robert's *Roman des origines et origines du roman* (Paris, 1972) offer psychoanalytic interpretations of the novel's generic development.

8. Yosef Haim Yerushalmi's *Freud's Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable* (New Haven, Conn., 1991) has been followed by a rich body of scholarship examining Freud's Judaic background. Particularly noteworthy are Ken Frieden's *Freud's Dream of Interpretation* (Albany, N.Y., 1990) and his "Freud, Women, and Jews: Viennese Jokes and Judaic Dream Interpretation," in *The Solomon Goldman Lectures*, ed. D. P. Bell and H. M. Lewis (Chicago, 2003), 71–84. See also Shuli Barzilai's "Mind the Gap: Some Midrashic Propositions for *Moses and Monotheism*," *Psychoanalytic Review* 91.6 (2004): 831–52.

earlier fiction, as well as in the work of writers such as Micha Yosef Berdichevsky, whom Agnon is known to have admired.⁹

Berdichevsky's *Two Camps*, for instance, which was received enthusiastically by Hebrew writers when it appeared in 1900, also portrays stymied love affairs in two generations. The affairs are linked strategically and symbolically through Michael's tryst with a woman who tragically turns out to be his beloved's mother. As in Agnon's story, the mother of the protagonist dies in the prime of her life, and her loss sets in motion an unslakable thirst for love and attention that prevents Berdichevsky's protagonist from finding solace anywhere. The full significance of Berdichevsky's narrative emerges from its brilliant "doubling of old upon new . . . or more precisely, new from within the old."¹⁰ Yet in point of narrative space and focus, the older generation's problems occupy only a minuscule position in Berdichevsky's story compared to the calibrated attention given to both generations in Agnon's and Freud's texts.

In other words, while Dora and Tirtza focus on their parents and their parents' friends, Berdichevsky's Michael is exclusively concerned with himself. To be sure, generational strife matters greatly in *Two Camps*—after all, the protagonist represents one of those unfortunate young men whose modernity banishes them "from their father's table."¹¹ Yet although Michael's "camp" stands for an entire generation, his relationship to the parent camp is barren and stunted compared to Tirtza's and Dora's anxious fixation on their parents' dysfunctional lives.

Ultimately, *In the Prime of Her Life* and Dora's case are family narratives compared to which Berdichevsky's *Two Camps* reads like a lyrical/philosophical treatise.¹² Berdichevsky's modernized vision of Jewish life, in which personal affairs are inescapably national, had an unquestionable impact upon the young Agnon.¹³ But from Freud, on the other hand,

9. A comprehensive account of Berdichevsky's impact on the young Agnon can be found in Avner Holzman's *Essays on Micha Josef Berdyczewski* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv, 1993), 149–61. See also Nurit Govrin, ed., *Alone in His Cave: Micha Josef Berdichevsky Remembered by His Contemporaries* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv, 1997), 58–59.

10. Dan Miron, "The Turning Point in Modern Hebrew Fiction in Mahanayim," in *Thought and Fiction in the Works of Berdichevsky*, ed. Z. Kagan (Hebrew; Haifa, 1981), 35.

11. Alan, Mintz, *Banished from Their Father's Table: Loss of Faith and Hebrew Autobiography* (Bloomington, Ind., 1989).

12. Zippora Kagan defines *Two Camps* as a lyrical novel that transcends its biblical antecedents in the Jacob cycle. See Zipora Kagan, *From Aggadah to Modern Fiction in the Work of Berdichevsky* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv, 1983), 59–63.

13. At the conclusion of his magisterial study of Agnon, Arnold Band observes that "when one returns to Berdichevsky and Peretz after studying Agnon, it be-

Agnon may have obtained a specific variation of a plot pattern suited to the historiosophic depiction of generational conflict in which the shortcomings of two generations are reassessed in dialectical relationship to each other.

David Aberbach has observed that love triangles characterize practically all of Agnon's fiction from the short story "Agunot" to the last unfinished novel, *Shira*.¹⁴ Written before his German sojourn, Agnon's signature story "Agunot" (1908) already employs two love triangles intersecting at a point, but the relationship between generations, which will become so central to Agnon's later family narratives, is not activated here. Instead, a symbolic object, the Holy Ark, acquires the role of a metaphorical lover (Ark-Ben Uri-Dinah/Dinah-Ezekiel-Freideleh) and a final reshuffling of the triangle's parameters results in deferment of redemption in Zion. Dinah's father leaves "Jerusalem with his daughter. He had failed in his settlement there . . . His house was deserted; the house of study stood desolate."¹⁵ Even the rabbi who disregarded Dinah's distress feels compelled to abandon Jerusalem and wander in the Diaspora as a consequence of his error.¹⁶

This national preoccupation with Zionist redemption and diasporic wanderings operates also in *In the Prime of Her Life*, albeit less conspicuously. After all, Tirtza chooses the local antiquarian Akavia Mazal over a younger and wealthier suitor who sends her Zionist-flavored love letters, which turn Tirtza's choice into a symbolic reassessment of Diaspora versus Zion. Thus, while a sustained focus on generational tension distinguishes *In the Prime of Her Life* from Agnon's early story "Agunot" as much as from Berdichevsky's *Two Camps*, *In the Prime of Her Life* in turn departs from Freud's narrative primarily through Agnon's preoccupation with the fate of the Jewish nation.

comes clear that Agnon's narrative technique, for all its originality and idiosyncrasies, is a logical development of their turning from Mendeleian realism toward German Neoromanticism. One can isolate in Berdichevsky and Peretz dozens of situations, motifs, and problems that reappear in Agnon, albeit in a changed form or in a different context." *Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of A. Y. Agnon* (Berkeley, Calif., 1968), 451.

14. David Aberbach, *At the Handles of the Lock: Themes in the Fiction of S. J. Agnon* (Oxford, 1984), 14.

15. S. Y. Agnon, "Agunot," trans. B. Hochman, *A Book That Was Lost and Other Stories*, ed. A. Mintz and A. G. Hoffman (New York, 1995), 46.

16. Agnon's dramatization of deferred redemption in Zion is examined at length in Anne Golomb Hoffman's *Between Exile and Return: S. Y. Agnon and the Drama of Writing* (Albany, N.Y., 1991); regarding "Agunot" in particular, see also Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi's *Booking Passage: Exile and Homecoming in the Modern Jewish Imagination* (Berkeley, Calif., 2000), 93–94.

But except for this preoccupation with national redemption, *In the Prime of Her Life* replicates *Dora's* characteristic features: While *Dora's* (syphilitic) father engages in an adulterous affair with Frau K, *Tirza's* (certifiably heartsick) mother hankers after her first love, Akavia Mazal. Sexual desire for a parental figure, which Freud encourages *Dora* to acknowledge and possibly even act upon, is actually carried out in Agnon's story when *Tirza* marries her mother's beloved and conceives his child. Though contemporary readers are revolted by Freud's suggestion that a healthy eighteen-year-old girl would have encouraged Herr K's advances,¹⁷ within the framework of historical responsibility emphasized by Agnon's narrative, *Tirtza* and Akavia's marriage seems more acceptable, albeit still problematic, especially since *Tirtza's* chronicle withholds a happy ending.

While Freud's scientific discourse aims to record *Dora's* "talking cure"—which he admits did not succeed—Agnon's text is presented as *Tirtza's* "writing cure," for after her marriage she rather hopelessly tries "to find rest in . . . writing, so did I write all that is written in this book."¹⁸ But since they are fixated on the dysfunctional love lives of their parents' generation, both *Dora* and *Tirtza* function primarily as observers and raconteurs of their families' troubles. Even the geographic settings of Freud and Agnon's texts correspond to each other, for both shuttle between Vienna and an unnamed town in the provinces.¹⁹ It is again significant that a national dimension distinguishes Agnon's narrative from Freud's, operating in Agnon's text through references to the destroyed temple in Jerusalem and the pseudo-Zionist aspirations of *Tirtza's* rejected suitor. This understated Zionist potential represents the road not taken in Agnon's novella.

As a symbol, the road plays an important role in *Tirtza's* and *Dora's* dream worlds. Like *Dora*, *Tirtza* recounts two dreams. The second one, which occurs right after she declares herself to Akavia, bears a striking resemblance to *Dora's* second dream. *Dora* dreams that she was

walking about in a town which I did not know. I saw streets and squares which were strange to me. Then I came into a house where I

17. See, for instance, Charles Bernheimer, *In Dora's Case: Freud—Hysteria—Feminism* (New York, 1985), 29; Marcus, "Freud and *Dora*," 59 and 88; Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York, 1987), 232.

18. S. Y. Agnon, *In the Prime of Her Life*, trans. G. Levin, in *Eight Great Hebrew Short Novels*, ed. A. Lelchuk and G. Shaked (New York, 1993), 216.

19. The town is called Szybusz (muddle) only later in *A Simple Story* (1935), where *Tirtza* and Akavia reappear briefly.

lived, went to my room, and found a letter from Mother lying there. She wrote saying that as I had left home without my parents' knowledge she had not wished to write to me to say that Father was ill. "Now he is dead, and if you like you can come." I then went to the station and asked about a hundred times: "Where is the station?" I always got the answer: "Five minutes." I then saw a thick wood before me which I went into, and there I asked a man whom I met. He said to me: "Two and a half hours more." He offered to accompany me. But I refused and went alone. I saw the station in front of me and could not reach it. At the same time I had the usual feeling of anxiety that one has in dreams when one cannot move forward. Then I was at home. I must have been traveling in the meantime, but I know nothing about that. I walked into the porters' lodge, and inquired for our flat. The maidservant opened the door to me and replied that Mother and the others were already at the cemetery.²⁰

The dream ends as Dora enters her room and begins reading a big book that lies on her writing table.

In line with Freud's admission that his analytical observations were intuitively known to writers from ancient times, we could adduce the mere replication of Dora's road, woods, cemetery, and book in Tirtza's dream as renewed evidence of the genuine universality of Freud's theories. However, the narrative contexts of Dora's and Tirtza's dreams further suggest that more than a psychocultural coincidence exists here.

Tirtza's dream takes place after her fateful encounter with Akavia Mazal at the *bookbinder's* shop. He follows her to the edge of the *woods*, where she confesses that she thinks about him every day, and searches for his traces in the *cemetery* "by my mother's grave."²¹ Tirtza then dreams that she had walked many hours, unconscious of her destination, until she meets an old woman who resembles Akavia's servant. This woman addresses Tirtza three times, stressing more forcefully each time that Tirtza is Leah's daughter and should therefore acknowledge even obscure relationships in her mother's past: "Did I not say you are Leah's daughter, while you swept by me as though it did not matter a straw . . . Did I not nurse your mother with milk of my breasts?"²²

In an insightful analysis of Agnon's novella, Nitza Ben-Dov argues convincingly that Akavia's servant in Tirtza's dream represents Leah's

20. Sigmund Freud, *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, ed. P. Rieff (New York, 1963), 14–20.

21. Agnon, *In the Prime*, 206.

22. *Ibid.*, 208.

bosom friend Mintshi Gottlieb. Ben-Dov attributes the three speeches in Tirtza's dream to Mintshi's manipulation of Tirtza "in three covert stages in each of which she releases information that insinuates itself into Tirtza's mind and works an upheaval there."²³ Such a splitting of allegiances between family and close friends characterizes Dora's anxiety as well, for Dora is forced to choose between her mother and Frau K, as well as between other problematic permutations involving Dora's parents and the Ks.

As we previously noted, Dora's dream ends after she goes to her room and opens a hefty book which she cannot quite comprehend. Freud attributes this reading motif to Dora's heightened interest in sexual matters, fanned by the girl's intimate association with her father's lover, Frau K. In Agnon's story, the crucial stage of Mintshi and Dora's strange intimacy is actually portrayed as a reading experience, for during the "second stage" of Mintshi's orchestrated manipulation of Tirtza—when Tirtza and Mintshi lie together in Mintshi's bed, recalling Dora's similar situation in Frau K's bed—Mintshi presents Tirtza with a manuscript she claims to have copied from Akavia's diary. It is from this manuscript that Tirtza gains detailed knowledge of Akavia and her mother's aborted romance—while the reader indirectly notices a longstanding intimacy between Mintshi and Akavia.²⁴

Freud interprets Dora's dream of her father's death as a desire for revenge against him, especially since she insists that her father and Frau K push her toward Frau K's jilted husband in order to appease him. The mother's letter in Dora's dream recalls her to conventional family values and responsibilities. By contrast, in Agnon's story a parent's death actually occurs, and following it, Tirtza's quasi-incestuous sense of responsibility toward the entire generation of her parents is precipitated by a family friend (according to Ben-Dov) or masterminded by the surviving parent (according to Yehoshua, as we will see further on).

But what motivates Mintshi to uncover the past before her friend's grieving daughter? Why would she fan Tirtza's interest in Akavia and push her into his not-so-eager arms? Does she seek to repair a breach of

23. Nitza Ben-Dov, *Agnon's Art of Indirection: Uncovering Latent Content in the Fiction of S. Y. Agnon* (Leiden, 1993), 113.

24. Akavia's diary plays a central role not only in developing Tirtza's self-knowledge and propelling the plot forward but also in providing the reader with key information about the characters' history. Compared to Freud's indirect presentation of Dora's words (except when relaying her dreams), it is interesting that Agnon chose a first-person narration that enables Tirtza to tell her "own" story.

faith in Leah's past? Does she imagine that Tirtza will satisfy Akavia's longing for Leah?

Can it be that [Mintshi] has been long waiting for a chance to resurrect a relationship with Akavia and, if only vicariously, live out her love for him? Or, on the contrary, has the bitter draught of unreciprocated love, loneliness, and a bad marriage led her to devise an elaborate plan of vengeance, a trap? And who then is the main target of her poisoned arrow, "Leah's daughter" or Akavia himself?²⁵

Ben-Dov does not offer a solution to this well-posed quandary. Yet the thesis of a concerted manipulation of Tirtza's desires—whether by Mintshi, as Ben-Dov claims, or by Mintz as Yehoshua argues in his essay on Agnon's novella—can be better understood in light of Dora's case, where Dora insists that, for their own warped interests, her father and Frau K push her into Herr K's arms.

The alliterative and monetary connotation linking Mintz's and Mintshi's names in Agnon's novella implies that they are gendered variations of a single identity, two sides of the same coin.

Despite the fact that her own name means volition (*tirtzeb* = will want), in her retrospective narrative Tirtza asserts that she once believed "a person's deeds and future were decided by others," suggesting that she now realizes she had been vulnerable to manipulation.²⁶ We must question altogether whether Tirtza's statements are reliable.²⁷ And if so, does she learn to think independently after her marriage? First of all, it is clear that not all of Tirtza's guides are equally influential, for when the Hebrew teacher Segal directs her toward a suitable match with his student Landau, Tirtza wavers and delays. While Ben-Dov attributes this hesitation to Tirtza's internalization of Mintshi's desire for Akavia, A. B. Yehoshua reads it as Tirtza's subconscious subjugation to Mintz's "enthusiastic guilt" toward his wife's lost love.²⁸ In any case, whether purposefully or subconsciously, the Mintshi/Mintz duo propel Tirtza toward Akavia.

25. Ben-Dov, *Agnon's Art*, 116, n. 7.

26. Agnon, *In the Prime*, 190.

27. This aspect of Tirtza's narration is addressed in Arnold Band's "The Unreliable Narrator in *My Michael* and *In the Prime of Her Life*" (Hebrew), *Hasifrut* 3.6 (1971): 32–34.

28. Yehoshua's essay stresses the akedaic connotations of *In the Prime of Her Life*'s charged *bineni* ('here I am') and *bito yehidato* ('his daughter, his only one'), yet unfortunately these crucial connotations were overlooked in the English translations of both Agnon's novella and Yehoshua's essay. For the original version, see A. B. Yehoshua, *Kobḥab ba-nora shel ashmah ketanah: Ha-beksher ba-musari shel ba-tekst ba-sifrut* (Terrible power of a minor guilt) (Tel Aviv, 1998), 148–49.

Yet what is Mintshi's function in Agnon's text if Mintz alone can perform the psychological insemination that is physically carried out by Akavia at the end of the story? Freud attributes latent lesbian desires to Dora's relationship with Frau K. However that may be, in Agnon's narrative Tirtza craves from Mintshi the attention, affection, and guidance which neither of her parents provides. Amos Oz's analysis of *In the Prime of Her Life* in fact emphasizes this yearning precisely by drawing attention to Mintshi's story about her nephew, who rebounds in distress from a doubled father image to a stable mother—a mother that in Tirtza's case is sorely missing and only partially substituted by Mintz, Mintshi, or Akavia.

Initially faulting both her father and Frau K for pushing her toward Herr K, Dora subsequently blames her father and tends to exonerate Frau K. A similar but reversed division of parental "guidance" emerges in Agnon's narrative when read in light of Dora's case, particularly when we keep in mind Yehoshua's psychoanalytic/akedaic interpretation of *In the Prime of Her Life* as the father's binding of his daughter to Leah's jilted lover. For while Freud's Dora directly accuses her father, Agnon circumvents the portrayal of a father who "prostitutes" his daughter, even for the worthy purpose of amending past mistakes, by interposing a nurturing female figure who, as in a dream, shields the reader from shocking thoughts. Such a strategy keeps the narrative flowing at a mesmerizing mood and tempo, disturbing us only when the ambiguous ending forces us to reconsider the narrative's premises from the beginning.

As mentioned earlier, Agnon's preoccupation with Jewish culture distinguishes his narrative from Freud's case study, which disregards the ethnic dimension of his patients' lives although we now know that Ida Bauer ("Dora") and her circle were Austrian Jews.²⁹ Compared to the notion of Dora launching into an affair with Herr K to clear the way for her father and Frau K's liaison, Tirtza's marriage to Akavia closes a circle of irresponsibility in a grand historical sense. After all, Akavia's mother returned to Judaism in order to correct her ancestors' financially motivated breach of faith. Her effort would have petered out if Akavia had no issue. Mintz's wealth, on the other hand, fails to save Leah from the untimely death met by her brother, who died as a result of a financial feud with a local Polish overlord. Tirtza's union with Akavia thus implies the triumph of tribal steadfastness (Zion) over mammon (Diaspora), an

29. For a historical account of Ida Bauer's milieu, see Hanna S. Decker's *Freud, Dora and Vienna 1900* (New York, 1991) and Patrick Mahony's *Freud's Dora: A Psychoanalytic, Historical and Textual Study* (New Haven, Conn., 1996).

opposition curiously destabilized by the empty Zionist rhetoric of Tirtza's rejected suitor, the young and affluent, but powerless, Landau.

Agnon's story draws also from biblical lore, particularly the Jacob cycle with its competition among brothers (Jacob and Esau) and wives/sisters (Leah and Rachel). If Akavia derives from Ya'akov and Landau from Esau, then Tirtza, manipulated into choosing between them, falls into the position of a blind Isaac, which dovetails with the akedaic connotations that are attached to Tirtza early on.³⁰ If Agnon's Leah stands for the biblical Rachel because she is Akavia's true love, then Mitshi becomes the second best sister, the biblical Leah. But, then again, we must remember that Akavia's diary (preserved by Mintshi) hints at an initial preference for Minshi over Leah, which is perhaps a seed of rivalry over him. Finally, when we equate Tirtza with Dina, the biblical Leah's daughter who was a victim of sexual aggression during a stroll through the fields, we find one last parallel with Freud's case study. As Freud points out, Herr K had propositioned and traumatized Dora during a stroll by the woods that figure so prominently in Dora's dream. In Agnon's narrative, the dream in which Tirtza strolls "in the fields" and is accosted by Mintshi transposed into Akavia's old servant ties together biblical and Freudian undertones by exposing the protagonist's mounting, yet diffused, anxiety over social and generational demands that have been heavily sexualized.

The difference between Freudian and biblical modes of family behavior spearheads Yael Feldman's insistence on an uneasy relationship between these modes:

Equipping Isaac and Rebecca with twins rather than a single son, the biblical narrative circumvents a fundamental presupposition of classical psychoanalysis—the triangularity of all family dynamics. "Squaring the triangle," so to speak, the Jacob story forestalls, at least on the surface, the pitfall of internal conflict imputed by Freud to any son in the oedipal position. Rather, the neat distribution of loyalties, in which each child is aligned with one parent, allows for some dyadic object relations, resulting in bonding rather than conflict.³¹

Mintshi's ambiguous yet crucial position within *In the Prime of Her Life's* double triangle frame (Leah-Mintz-Akavia-(Mintshi)/(Mintshi)-Akavia-

30. Ben-Dov, *Agnon's Art*, 123; Yehoshua, *Koblah ha-nora*, 148–49.

31. Yael S. Feldman, "'And Rebecca Loved Jacob,' but Freud Did Not," in *Freud and Forbidden Knowledge*, ed. P. L. Rudnytsky and E. H. Spitz (New York, 1994), 10.

Tirtza-Landau) places her in the position of “squaring” each triangle in Agnon’s tale. She diffuses what could have been a Freudian intergenerational mode of direct conflict between Tirtza and her parents into a tamer self-sacrificing sense of inner anxiety that surfaces against Mintshi through Tirtza’s dream.

Tirtza’s continued loneliness despite the consummation of her marriage to Akavia sets the stage for a psychoanalytic journey into her family’s past, so that while Akavia researches the town’s history in the local graveyard, Tirtza develops a history-in-the-making both through her writing and in her womb. Though this is not the frolicking bliss one might have expected, Tirtza’s situation does improve upon Leah’s handicap and Mintshi’s bareness, not to mention the total despair of Berdichevsky’s Michael or the jaded bitterness of Freud’s Dora. Still, as in most of his works, Agnon’s flirtation with his characters’ private happiness is as usual deferred here to an ever-elusive redemption on a grander historiosophic plane.